DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 362 FL 022 039

AUTHOR Brindley, Geoff
TITLE Becoming a Researcher: Teacher-Conducted Research and Professional Growth.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 18p.; In: Sadtono, Eugenius, Ed. Issues in Language Teacher Education. Anthology Series 30; see FL 022 033.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; *Educational Research; Foreign Countries; Language Research; *Language Teachers; *Professional Development; Research Methodology; *Research Problems; Statistical Analysis; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

This preliminary study investigated the perceptions of the research process of teachers who had newly become researchers and, in particular, it sought to explore the relationship between teacher-conducted research and professional growth. Six experienced English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers were interviewed. It found that all of the teachers were investigating research questions that were generated by their own classroom experience, either as a response to specific incidents or issues, or as a way to validate experiential knowledge or beliefs. Three of the respondents felt that the most difficult problem they faced in doing research was the need to narrowly and precisely focus their topics, while four mentioned the difficulties they had in interpreting their findings. All the respondents mentioned time constraints as a factor which significantly affected their ability to carry out their research plans. Difficulties with quantitative techniques, academic writing styles, and planning were also mentioned. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

BECOMING A RESEARCHER: TEACHER-CONDUCTED RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Geoff Brindley

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Wong Kim Weng

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

The Role of Research in Language Teaching

In recent years, research has begun to occupy an increasingly prominent place in language teaching. This shift in emphasis has been brought about by a number of influences. First, with the introduction of learner-centred curricula, among the many skills needed by teachers are research skills to undertake critical investigation of their own classroom practice and to test different curricular proposals. Second, the increasing professionalization of language teaching, which has been accompanied by an explosion of knowledge, has also served to give research a higher profile. Teachers now have an increasing range of opportunities to undertake tertiary courses related to language teaching and applied linguistics. Such courses usually include some familiarization with principles of educational research and require participants to undertake an individual research project. As a result, there is now an increasing number of graduates who are experienced in research and who have the skills and motivation to carry it out. Third, at the level of program administration, research has begun to have an influence on the development of educational policy: as the amount of funding for language teaching programs has grown, so administrators and program managers have turned increasingly to research findings to assist them in making decisions on the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies and programs (Brindley 1990).

In a climate in which research-based knowledge is assuming greater importance in language education, components on "the teacher as researcher" are now finding their way into teacher development workshops. Action research models developed in general education (e.g. Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) are now beginning to be applied in language teaching classrooms (see, for example, Nunan 1989). This trend coincides with a considerable growth in the number of classroom-based studies of various aspects of second and foreign language acquisition (e.g. Chaudron 1988; van Lier 1988; Ellis 1990).

ED 370 362

FL022039

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Research and Professional Development: Making the Connection

Three types of research are traditionally referred to in the context of language education. The first of these is usually characterized as basic or "pure" research which is aimed at contributing to basic knowledge in the field, at building and/or testing theory. In the context of language learning, for example, research into language processing or learners' stages of development would qualify as "basic" research. The relationship of this type of research to professional development may seem indirect in that it does not usually speak directly to issues which are crucial to teachers such as methodology. However, as Lett (1983:14) points out, "while basic research may be irrelevant to classroom practice at a given moment, 'irrelevant' does not necessarily mean 'useless'". By adding to teachers' knowledge of the theoretical foundations of their field, basic research can provide conceptual frameworks within which they can situate and observe their teaching. In this way, it can assist them to analyse and articulate the theoretical basis of their own beliefs and practice and thus add to their reflective capacity.

The second type of research which is usually identified is applied research which addresses an immediate perceived need or specific problem. Applied research may be undertaken to provide a basis for decision-making (either at classroom or administrative level) or to illuminate pedagogical practice.For example, teachers may set out to investigate the effects of different types of error feedback and then modify their practices on the basis of what they find. The relationship of this kind of research to professional development is more direct. If it is teachers themselves who conduct the research, participation in research may contribute directly both to their knowledge and practical skills. Using the results of applied research conducted by others may also act as a stimulus to teachers' professional growth since it may involve them in systematic classroom observation, monitoring or hypothesis-testing.

The type of research which would appear to have the closest link with practice is action research. A detailed account of the various versions of action research is beyond the scope of this paper and can be found in McTaggart (1991). Though there is some disagreement in the literature surrounding the extent to which action research should be aimed at critiquing the existing social order, broadly speaking, it is characterized by its focus on concrete problems in the practitioner's environment and by its participatory and collaborative nature. It aims to:

- improve practice
- improve understanding of the practice by its practitioners.
- improve the situation in which the practice takes place.

(Kemmis 1983)

Action research obviously has the potential to be an intrinsic part of a teacher's professional growth since it is by definition carried out by practitioners and requires them to systematically investigate their own practice. One of the most commonly used models of action research, that of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) involves practitioners in a sytematic spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. For example, a teacher might systematically change his or her questioning behaviour and observe the effects. In this way, the outcomes of action research feed directly into and change practice.

THE STUDY

Background and Aims

Although many authors have argued that teachers should become researchers in their own classrooms and made suggestions as to how this might happen (e.g. Hopkins 1985; Nunan 1989), relatively little is known about how language teachers actually experience the research process. A small-scale preliminary study was therefore undertaken in order to investigate the perceptions of the research process of teachers who had newly become researchers and, in particular, to explore the relationship between teacher-conducted research and professional growth. The study aimed to address the following questions:

- How do teachers identify researchable issues or questions?
- What problems do they experience in doing research?
- What skills and knowledge do they feel they need to acquire to undertake research?
- What kind of support do they value?
- What do they see as the main benefits of doing research? How does undertaking research contribute to their professional growth?

It was hoped that the study would yield at least some preliminary information which would assist those responsible for providing professional and institutional support to teacher-researchers to better identify teachers' support needs and to provide appropriate in-service training and award courses on conducting research. At the same time, it was thought that insights on teachers' actual

experiences in carrying out research might be of help in demystifying the process for those who were thinking about embarking on research projects.

On the basis of the responses collected in this study it is planned to develop and administer a larger-scale questionnaire aimed at surveying a broader sample of teacher-researchers working in a wide variety of contexts.

Subjects

Six teachers were involved in the pilot study. Three were EFL and three were ESL teachers. All were experienced teachers, and had taught for periods ranging from six to over twenty years. At the time they were undertaking the research, they were all involved in a course of study, either an in-house course or a formal award course. Details of the subjects are contained in Table 1 below.

Subject	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Teaching Experience (Years)	6	10	15+	12	10	8
Formal Quals in ESL/EFL	Cert ESL Dip ESL	Nil Grad dip ESL (in prog)	Nil In-house course (in prog)	MA (in prog)	MA (in prog)	MA (in prog)
Context	EFL	Adult Immig	Adult Immig	Adult Immig	EFL	EFL
Prior Research Experience	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Undergrad Dissertation	Nil
Research Topic(s)	Problematic episodes in oral error correction	Learner interaction in group cloze Learner self-assessment	Strategies of a beginning reader	Effects of corrective feedback on students' oral production	Teachers' attitudes to student writing errors	Discourse in teacher training supervisory interviews

Table 1: Subject Biodata

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview format was used to obtain the data. A set of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting responses to the above questions was distributed to the teachers prior to the interview. They were asked to consider these questions in the light of their personal experiences in doing research and to take notes if they wished. In the interview, the same questions were asked of all respondents, though they were free to diverge or expand as they wished. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed with a view to extracting recurring themes, comments and impressions.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RESULTS: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

How do teachers identify researchable issues or questions?

Teachers' research questions begin with concrete teaching concerns

All of the teachers reported that the question or issue they chose to investigate was generated by questions they had been asking themselves about aspects of their own teaching and its effect on learners. Teacher 3's response sums this up well:

> It was an area I felt the need to do something in anyway. I had been teaching for some time a very low level group, illiterate in L1 mostly and some of them had become good readers and others not. So that was the question and it's also a question that I had felt that I needed to answer for some time so it wasn't as if I had much difficulty with finding the question.

Sometimes the question or issue was one which had been preoccupying them for some time:

> I didn't so much become interested in action research, actually-although the lectures were very good-as questions that I'd been going over in my mind for about six months before I did the diploma course. (Teacher 1)

For some teachers, having to undertake a research project provided the stimulus to undertake an investigation of a question that they would not have followed up systematically otherwise:

> ....the area I focussed on was kind of an area of professional interest and it was the sort of area I was asking myself questions on anyway - but they were the sort of questions that I wouldn't go any further than discussing it with colleagues or from my general observations involved in that aspect of the course or..you know..sometimes on getting feedback from other people. So I didn't have any kind of...I'd ask myself questions and evaluate and so forth but it was nothing systematic. (Teacher 6).

Particular incidents may highlight a researchable issue.

One teacher's interest in his research area was sparked off by a 'critical incident'. He had been the subject of a classroom observation using a checklist and had received negative feedback on his teaching performance. However, he felt that the checklist did not adequately reflect the complexities of classroom interaction:

I had a feeling that classrooms were very complicated places. I felt quite strongly that the sorts of checklists that are used to observe teachers possibly gloss that complexity in a way that often misrepresented what was going on - probably didn't give much insight into the...didn't give much of an explanation about what happened and were often taken as definitive judgements on the quality of the teacher. So I had a fairly strongly felt dislike of these checklists - not in themselves - but as they were being used. (Teacher 1)

Research is a way of validating experiential knowledge or beliefs.

In discussing their motivation to undertake research, three of the teachers specifically mentioned that they saw research as a way of systematically testing their implicitly-held theories and instinctive understandings of practice. Research-based knowledge, they thought, would enable them to have a more secure position when debating issues or defending their position with colleagues or others:

I think most of us were arguing on intuition and sometimes ideology rather than anything that was any sounder and so I thought it might be useful to be able to have something a little bit more substantial. (Teacher 4)

I wanted to demonstrate that my hunch was right but I also wanted to do some research into how native speakers actually did receive errors rather than merely just going on hunches because I hadn't done any specific reading on that topic. (Teacher 5)

What Problems do they Experience in Doing Research?

Focussing the question

Several of the teachers described the difficulties experienced in getting to a question that was narrowly-focussed enough to be manageable. In fact three respondents identified the need to define one's focus very precisely as one of the main lessons they had learned from undertaking their research project:

The main lesson (in doing the research) was just how precisely you have to think about defining the question before you start. In fact everything else rather pales compared to that...not only getting clear about it but getting clear about it before you start. (Teacher 1)

Some stayed with a broad question and ended up feeling dissatisfied that they had not focussed it more or arrived at more definitive answers to their question:

There's a slight disillusionment if you don't get clear answers to research questions....I've spent months doing this and all I've got is this list. (Teacher 1)

I didn't have a sufficiently focussed question at the outset - that would have helped quite a lot so I was kind of thinking in various different strands and hoping that something would crystallize before my eyes. (Teacher 5)

Two teachers described how they had narrowed the scope of their research question by going through a two-stage process. This comprised first a "trawling expedition" where data were gathered with no particular investigative focus.This was followed by a close examination of the data aimed at identifying particular issues of interest which could be turned into more narrowly-targetted questions:

My initial question was very broad like that and to cut it down to some manageable level.... I guess the initial study was sort of like what's going on..what sorts of things and that was sort of like a ground-clearing kind of thing. We did a couple of transcriptions, we had a look what was going on and then decided to focus on some aspect of that overall discourse or that overall event. So I think that initial study was important in actually trying to narrow...it showed..it brought up some issues that were a possible focus.... (Teacher 6)

Interpreting data/finding analytical categories.

Four of the teachers mentioned the difficulties they had experienced in interpreting their data, in particular in finding or adapting appropriate analytical categories:

I ended up with pages and pages and little index cards all over the floor trying to decide whether this was an example of clarifying or an example of something... (Teacher 2)

The problems I had in actually categorizing some of the errors were fairly tricky but in the end I decided to use the categories that most of the teachers had picked out for themselves. That seemed to hold pretty well anyway... (Teacher 5)

Time constraints.

All of the respondents mentioned time as a factor which significantly affected their ability to carry out their research plans. Their comments related to a number of different aspects of time management.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Juggling teaching and research

Most mentioned the difficulties that they had in juggling research and teaching commitments, even when they were not working full-time. One teacher remarked that, unlike teaching, research seemed to be an activity that was "interruptible by others", even though time had been specially set aside for it.

The amount of time taken by data collection and analysis

Several teachers mentioned practical problems associated with data collection and handling which they had not anticipated, such as the time associated with transcription:

> I found transcribing was a nightmare - very time-consuming, not particularly rewarding because you haven't analyzed it yet. (Teacher 1)

> Transcription of data was a huge job: I'd be sitting in the kitchen and the kids would come in...'you've heard that bit, you've heard that bit!' (Teacher 2)

As a result of the realization of the amount of time involved in transcription and analysis, three of the teachers reported that they decided to narrow the scope of their investigation. Teacher 2, for example, commented that:

> .... at the outset we weren't entirely clear whether we'd be looking at aspects of the teaching primarily or at its effects on the students....Partly due to time constraints we decided to concentrate on aspects of the teaching...it took us a really long time to actually arrive at that, that we wouldn't be able to gather a lot of data on what the student were doing - their responses - because it would be just too time-consuming and would end up being a much bigger project. So we had to make reference to the students' responses but we didn't focus on these and more time would have been needed to document and record the students' responses in detail.

This teacher felt that where research was done for the benefit of the institution, it was important to have specific release time and that undertaking research without extra time was:

> too much on top of everything else...

Teacher 3, however, felt that teachers themselves could organize their time so as to build in time for research:

...People say 'we haven't got time to work so closely with students'. It's just a matter of reorganizing your time really and it all comes back to writing up objectives and that sort of thing. Just make everything a smaller focus. Feel that you can do less more thoroughly..... Maybe it's just a matter of teachers realizing that if they want to get into some research, realize that they're going to do it and just work out their objectives for their course plan in a different way so they do allow time for that..and so that that's programmed into the class time also...one hour a day or something to set this thing up.

What Skills and Knowledge do they Feel they Need to Acquire?

Data analysis techniques.

Several respondents reported some uncertainty with the use of analytical techniques.

In this connection, two teachers felt that some of their qualitative data could have been amenable to quantitative analysis but felt handicapped in not knowing how to use the necessary statistics:

In terms of analyzing it I felt I would have benefited from having a greater knowledge of statistics because I felt that some of the questions I was looking at really needed to be statistically correlated rather than me just kind of looking at them. (Teacher 5)

Academic writing

Three of the respondents mentioned problems with knowing how to present the results of their research in the appropriate style and format and highlighted the need to see models. The uncertainty of some beginning researchers about how to write up their research is typified by Teacher 1's response:

It was much more difficult than I'd expected due to my almost total lack of acquaintance with the genre. At uni the audience had been different, the subject area couldn't have been more different-I mean 'empirical' was a dirty word....I didn't realize that I had that problem until I started doing this.

As well as uncertainty concerning the structure of the research report, another question raised was how to present a report which could be used by colleagues as well as fulfil the requirements of a scholarly piece of writing:

So I think the overall schematic structure of it all I wasn't familiar with and how to present some of the data and the different levels..so that I think was problematic..... just sort of a lack of knowledge of "what does it look like at the end"?...I mean I had to physically go and get them, have a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

look at them, say "Yeah, three or four or five chapters, six chapters and so on"..and the other thing was a little bit of confusion for me over the audience in that who am I writing for?-my colleagues, am I writing for the lecturers at university or the general public-that was initially problematic I think. And in the end I'm not sure if I resolved that - I wanted it to be useful to people where I work in order to.. for them to have a read..who are involved in teacher training and so on but it had to..be academic enough so that it would be useful for people beyond that institution. (Teacher 6)

Planning

Two teachers identified planning as a problem. One commented that although teachers should by definition be competent planners, he had difficulty in transferring these skills to carry out a research project:

I got skills in terms of planning and setting objectives and those sorts of things as a teacher but I think I wasn't applying them enough to the research. (Teacher 6)

What Kind of Support do they Value?

Working collaboratively with colleagues and/or supervisors

When asked what advice they would give to beginning teacher-researchers, three of the respondents highlighted the necessity to work collaboratively with colleagues, either in pairs or groups:

Work with someone else - a supervisor or a co-teacher...someone like that that you could talk to or clarify your ideas, question each other about why you were doing things, does this fit in with the research questions, keeping each other on the question, not doing things which are off on a tangent. (Teacher 2)

This was seen as particularly necessary at the beginning stages of research where clarifying the scope of the investigation was important:

A colleague doing the MA and I were doing study together as part of the pragmatics course. So it was useful in talking to her and we analyzed the data together, we looked at some of the features and we decided on some changes that we'd implement. So the initial part was very much a shared kind of process and that I think was important - that each of us brought different skills to the analysis stage. (Teacher 6)

The importance of choosing a research topic of interest and relevance to one's own workplace was emphasized by several teachers. If the project outcomes were seen as widely applicable in the workplace, enlisting colleagues as subjects or data gatherers became much easier. This in turn facilitated collective ownership of the project and enhanced the likelihood of the project outcomes being taken up by colleagues:

> If there hadn't been that general consensus on the value of the thing then it would have been more difficult for individuals to put themselves forward. The fact that everybody in the staffroom was interested in it meant that there was no loss of face...because it happens to everyone. What I was looking at was failure..I thought this might be a problem but the fact that it happens to everyone meant that almost every one stepped forward after we'd been talking about it. (Teacher 1)

One teacher commented that it was important to of ensure that colleagues were well-informed of the nature, purpose and proposed outcomes outcomes of the research if their co-operation was to be sought. Personal appearances by the researcher to explain the project were seen as crucial in gaining and maintaining colleagues' involvement:

> Also in terms of getting people to respond to questionnaires I would suggest that you give some kind of spiel at a meeting in person rather than just sending a memo....it goes down better if you have something outlined and I also offered to give a presentation of the results afterwards... I made the assignment itself available which a lot of the teachers read and I'm going to give a talk at another staff meeting afterwards.....People are very interested so I had the support of interested colleagues-it was very helpful. (Teacher 5)

"Hands-on" courses/workshops on research methods

Five of the teachers interviewed had attended formal courses or in-house workshops on action research methods before or concurrently with their research and found these to be very valuable in providing the necessary research tools:

> The Action Research course was what made me realize that it might be possible to approach this question at all....otherwise I think it would have been just one of those things that one shoved to the back of one's mind and just forgot about ...without having any means to carry it out. The course set out to give teachers the tools and show us what was possible. (Teacher 1)

One teacher commented, however, that workshops aimed at assisting teachers to carry out research needed to be very clearly focussed on specific research proposals.

There was an initial workshop where they gave some theoretical background and so on but I felt the workshop could have been a bit more directive and actually made suggestions for possible research and discussed the feasibility of our ideas. (Teacher 2)

Another teacher thought that workshops or courses on research methods should allow beginning researchers the opportunity to work through the research process in a step-by-step fashion:

.....I think what would have been nice as part of that course there to help me for example would be to do a range of smaller tasks.....that having one assignment at the end of the semester meant that people left things to the last generally speaking....and so smaller projects that broke down the whole process of doing research and doing a little mini-project where you'd come in and talk-you'd present it to a group of four or five as part of that course - would have been useful and would have developed my skills sooner I think so that I could have applied them as we were going through the course, at those initial stages certainly. (Teacher 6)

Institutional commitment

Several respondents commented on the role of the institution in encouraging research. One recurring theme was that if teachers were expected to undertake research on the institution's behalf, there had to be a commitment on the part of the institution that research was valued:

Within an institution that was luke-warm or not interested it would be difficult to do classroom-centred research. You need an institutional ethos that encourages research. (Teacher 1)

In this context, several teachers commented that the institution should provide adequate release time to carry out and write up research if this was expected in addition to their normal duties. One teacher thought that time to document research outcomes so they could be disseminated to a wider audience was particularly important:

You have to feel that there's going to be an audience...(If it's not published and disseminated) What on earth did we do it for? No-one's going to benefit from it. I mean we benefited from it but we didn't have to write it down to benefit from it. (Teacher 2)

A number of other suggestions were made concerning ways in which the institution could support research. These included the creation of research networks which would assist teachers to identify research questions and carry out their investigations:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

If institutions could help people perhaps with suggestions as to where the current state of research or work in a particular area is, what people have been working on and what would be worth following up because you feel that you're working in a bit of a vacuum in that you just pluck a research question out of the air.... and where does it fit in with the rest of the world? (Teacher 2)

Accessible literature.

All of the respondents reported that they had found the academic literature very helpful, although two had found the reading they did in their area slightly inaccessible at first because of its technicality. Several highlighted the utility of state-of-the-art surveys in particular which they found helpful in narrowing the scope of their investigation:

We got a picture of the whole question and I think it helped us to be more systematic...to say that's not the area we want to look at. (Teacher 4)

The literature also provided useful models of the research process:

Once I had asked the question anyway I started doing some reading in that area... I found that very helpful because it gave me something..it gave me an idea of how to go about it..you know, how to try and set it up, seeing how somebody else had done such a thing. (Teacher 3)

What do Teachers See as the Main Benefits in Doing Research? How Does Undertaking Research Contribute to their Professional Growth?

Changes in attitudes and teaching practices

Four of the respondents reported that having done research had brought about a change both in their attitudes to learning and/or their teaching practice:

It's changed my attitude to the way I look at classrooms. I would not go for glib explanations for why someone did a particular thing, used a particular piece of language... (Teacher 1)

I've transferred a lot of what I've learnt into other areas of my teaching-so some of the things I learned about group work, steps in a task - I've really incorporated it in a lot of my teaching and I think it's been beneficial. I think it has stimulated students and so on... (Teacher 2)

My teaching has changed and students react to my teaching in a different way so they've become far more interested in their work, they want to learn, they want to learn, they want to come. So that has been as a result of me getting more involved which is as a result of that close involvement that you get through doing research. (Teacher 3)

Some teachers also considered that doing research had made them more reflective, analytical and questioning in their teaching behaviour:

I learned how to reflect on my teaching (Teacher 2)

Now I find everything that they do interesting (Teacher 3)

I'm much more suspicious of recipes for achieving things in the classroom. (Teacher 1)

Research skills and techniques

Most respondents reported that doing research had provided them with a range of useful skills and techniques, especially at the level of making sense out of complex classroom data. At a more general level, several reported that carrying out their project had made them more organized and systematic in their approach:

Having those students working in that way has been quite good to have that involvement from them. I think it's a result of my becoming so attentive to detail and to planning and I think that that came out of getting organized in that way as a result of the research...I mean I used to spend a lot of time before too but it definitely did make me become more conscious of exactly what was going on... (Teacher 3)

For this teacher, this increased systematicity was manifested in more attention to documentation and record-keeping:

Because I'm keeping records of anything they do which is a change from what they normally do or even what they're not doing..I guess they just feel that I'm right behind them working very closely with them and that also they are able...they can see what they're learning also because we talk about it and so this has made them very interested and just different in how they go about their work. (Teacher 3)

Growth in confidence

Three of the teachers reported that doing the research project and familiarizing themselves in-depth with the literature in a particular area had given

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

them confidence in their ability both to undertake further research and to better express and justify their views of teaching and learning:

> (I now have) much greater confidence in being able to...articulate my ideas, thoughts, beliefs..because I think now that they're grounded much more in...relation to the reading that I've done, in relation to the project that I did...that I have some sort of evidence on which to base my beliefs or ...thoughts about some aspect of the course. So I think that is an important one, that I'm quite happy now to talk about that aspect of teacher education..that I feel much more confident as a professional to talk about it. (Teacher 6)

> ...It gives people a certain amount of confidence to be able to know that if one looks, patterns are observable, that...one can argue the case if someone comes in with a checklist. (Teacher 1)

Conclusions

Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:8) remark that "perhaps the most often heard observation about teacher research is that teachers invariably possess neither the skills nor the resources to carry out satisfactory and acceptable research." They go on, however, to point out that

> our experience of working with teachers who have conducted small-scale school-based research and the products of teacher research now emerging suggest that teacher research can generate rich, illuminating, and important insights into the way in which we teach and learn in our society. These insights ought to have a crucial place in the formulation of policy and practice

The responses given by the teachers involved in this small study give strong support to this view. Teachers clearly can conduct research successfully if they are given the necessary support and the resources to carry it out. Experienced teachers in particular are well equipped to start since, as several of the respondents pointed out, they already possess a good deal of experiential knowledge. This is summed up by one teacher thus:

> Practically speaking I knew a lot-I was very much involved in it as a practitioner. And so.. I mean.. I was quite confident that I had a good understanding of what was going on because I was actually involved in doing it. But then I sort of realized the further and further I got into it that that was on a different level...that experiential level and that there was a whole other level that I was really unaware of. And once I started reading the literature..then I realized.. gosh!..how much I didn't know about it all. And so...it was just completely different levels. I was operating at a practitioner level - I had that experiential....you know - those experiences that I based my beliefs and intuitions and things on...and

that...this other knowledge..this other body of work....that's in the body of literature, I didn't really delve deeply into once I started in that process...it raised lots of things. (Teacher 6)

The challenge for teacher educators is to harness this implicit knowledge and assist teachers to use their practice and their intuitions about it as a starting point for a more systematic and in-depth investigation which calls upon more formal research techniques. A blueprint for how this might happen is encapsulated in Teacher 1's advice to beginning researchers:

There's nothing wrong with having vague feelings, with having sort of feelings of uneasiness or rather ill-defined questions or doubts or interests in what one's doing in the classroom.... as long as one takes some time to narrow those down to something that's feasible as the focus of a research paper. I didn't just wake up one morning and all of a sudden this question occurred - as much time as I spent on doing the research and writing it up, I spent going through a process of gradually going from being troubled by something, asking around about it, finding out that apparently there wasn't very much, wondering what I could do about it, having to do something about it because of the assignment and then being put in a position where I had to define a research question..the purpose was provided by the assignment that I had to do and the course gave me some of the means to do it.

The accounts of the teachers in this study suggest that teacher educators who work in an institutional context can facilitate the research process in a number of ways. They can assist by providing teacher-researchers with initial support in framing research questions; by introducing them to research tools and methods which allow them to work through their own questions in a step by step fashion; by being available for consultation throughout the research process; by setting up research partnerships and/or networks as appropriate; by making sure that they are given due recognition for the time and effort expended; and by assisting with the publication and/or dissemination of the results of teacher-conducted research. If research can happen in this collaborative way, then the outcomes of teacher-conducted research have a greater likelihood of reaching the audience of fellow practitioners for whom it is primarily intended.

REFERENCE

BRINDLEY, G. 1990. Towards a Research Agenda for TESOL. Prospect, 6, 1.

CHAUDRON, C. 1988. Second Language Classrooms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ELLIS, R. 1990. Classroom Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

HITCHCOCK, G., & D. Hughes, 1989. Research and the Teacher. London: Routledge.

HOPKINS, D. 1985. A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

KEMMIS, R. 1983. Action Research. In Husen, T. and T. Postlethwaite (eds.). International Encyclopaedia of Education: Research and Studies. Oxford:Pergamon.

KEMMIS, R., & R. McTaggart, 1988. The Action Research Planner. Deakin University: Deakin University Press.

LETT, J. 1983. Research: what, why, and for whom?. In C.J. James (ed.) Practical Applications of Research in Foreign Language Teaching. Lincolnwood, Illinois: National Textbook Company.

McTAGGART, R. 1991. Action Research: A Short Modern History. Deakin University: Deakin University Press.

NUNAN, D. 1989. Understanding Language Classrooms. London: Prentice Hall.

van LIER, L. 1988. The Classroom and the Language Learner. London: Longman.